CultureCase

The impact of Playback Theatre on the mental health of older adults

This research was conducted by **Shoshi Keisari and three others** at the **University of Haifa, Israel**

Summary

This paper describes the mental health impacts generated by a programme of Playback Theatre sessions for visitors to adult day centres in Israel. ‘Playback Theatre is a form of improvisational theatre in which a group of actors creates a theatrical improvisation in response to a personal story’. The programme was effective in improving scores in the following validated mental health indices: ‘self-acceptance, personal growth, relationships with others, satisfaction with relationships, current well-being, positive affect, meaning in life, satisfaction with life, and self-esteem as well as depressive symptoms’. These improvements endured at least three months after the end of the programme.

A total of 78 participants across four day-care centres completed the 12-week program

40 were randomly assigned to the experimental group and 38 to the care-as-usual control group. The average age of the participants was 80 (with a range of ages between 63 and 96). Only one fifth of the participants were men. The sessions lasted 90 minutes and took place once a week. ‘The participants reported on aspects of mental health and mental illness before, immediately after, and three months after the intervention’.

The sessions were co-moderated by a drama therapist and a care worker

They entailed one participant sharing a part of their life story, which was then turned into a theatrical improvisation by others in the group. The researchers

believe the sessions improved mental health because they gave people the means to explore internal subjective past experiences in a tangible, vivid manner in a group setting. This built a sense of reconciliation and understanding about their own lives. The research also highlights the way in which theatrical improvisation encourages empathy for other people and other experiences. This is in addition to the known positive impacts of active theatrical participation more generally.

Keywords

elderly **theatre** **randomised control trial** **Israel** **mental health** **experiment**

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